100th anniversary of military weather forecasting

Oct 24, 2016 12:00 AM

It's been 100 years since the first weather forecast was provided for the British Armed Forces by the Met Office.

From the Battle of the Somme to current operations and exercises around the world, the Met Office has provided the latest forecasting information to better inform military commanders in their operations and exercises.

Although the Met Office were producing synoptic charts and covering North West Europe throughout World War One these were only used for work in the UK. The first general forecast for the British Army was not until 24 October 1916. The importance of meteorological forecasts has since always been considered critical and the Met Office has operated 24/7 since this day in 1916. As a sign of the significance of forecasts, they have been coded for transmission since 1915.

Archivist at the Met Office Catherine Ross said: "The Met Office had meteorological observers stationed at the front from 1915, providing critical meteorological information which impacted not only allied operations and also warning of conditions which would enable the enemy to launch gas attacks themselves.

"The operational forecasts proved to be highly important and after what was one of the only allied advances during the battle of Passchendaele one of the senior allied commanders sent a telegraph to Meteor R. E. to thank them for their accurate forecasts which had proven of great assistance in planning the operation."

Famously the forecasts provided by the Met Office played a crucial role in the timing of the D-Day landings in Normandy known as Operation Neptune. After calculating that the moon and tide conditions would only be simultaneously favourable on the 5, 6 and 7 June, meteorologists advised commanders to push back the operation from its originally anticipated date in May. This forecast was one of the most important in world history and was hugely important to the war's outcome.

The highly regarded Met Office service now attracts international attention, with allies such as the US and NATO drawing on data, advice and services from the Met Office as well as those of their parent national or military meteorological bodies.

In stark contrast to 1916 when all observation sites were manned and charts were hand drawn every few hours, our meteorologists now use the latest technology including one of the most powerful supercomputers in the world, which can do more than 1000 trillion calculations a second.

As well as meteorologists permanently stationed with the military, the Met Office provides the Mobile Met Unit (MMU), to support deployed operations and exercises in the UK and overseas. Mobile Met Unit (MMU) personnel are Met Office employees (trained meteorologists and engineers) who have volunteered to become part of this Sponsored Reserves unit of the RAF in order to enable continuous support to deployed military forces across the spectrum of conflict from peace to war. Members of the MMU have been deployed in support of operations continually since 1982.

More information about the role of Meteorologists in the First World War can be found on our event webpage.

© Crown Copyright 2017